

Community and the Courage to Act

Skidmore College Commencement Remarks 21 May 2011

Philip A. Glotzbach President

Good morning. Let me add my own greetings and welcome to parents, honored guests, and everyone in attendance at this historic event: the College's 100th Commencement. Above all, to the members of the Skidmore College Class of 2011, congratulations. You are the largest graduating class in Skidmore's history. You are an energetic and most accomplished class, and we are very proud of you!

Today also marks another important College milestone: it is the final Commencement for Skidmore's external degree program, the University Without Walls – or UWW, as it is affectionately known. For forty years, UWW has pioneered in creating innovative ways for non-traditional students to earn a Skidmore undergraduate degree, while still fulfilling their responsibilities at work and at home. Skidmore takes great pride in the 1,500 alumni who have completed the UWW program, sixteen of whom will march across this stage today, and one of whom will receive an honorary degree. Our UWW students brought to their liberal arts education a rich tapestry of life experiences, they were well positioned to appreciate the value of what they learned, and in the process they transformed both their own lives and some portion of the world. We salute the UWW graduates with us here today, and with them all the UWW graduates from times past.

Next, let me draw your attention to the 23 national flags arrayed on the stage today that represent the homelands of those graduating seniors who have journeyed far to learn with us and who, in turn, have enriched the Skidmore community.

Graduates, this ceremony and, in a more concrete sense, this stage symbolically represent a bridge you will traverse later on this morning from your college years to the beginning of your future life. As the economy remains unsettled (to say the least), opportunities to make use of what you have learned here may not present themselves in an obvious way. And even if you have identified your next steps after graduating – perhaps you have secured a job, a place in a professional school, a fellowship for graduate study, Teach for America, or a position in the Peace Corps – you still face a moment of transition from a life that has grown familiar to one that, by contrast, is yet unknown.

The good news is that those who have supported you in your journey to this point – your family, your friends, and more recently the members of the Skidmore faculty and staff who have meant so much to you during your college years – remain committed to your success. They are your safety net, and they will still be there for you, even as you take flight to the next stage of your life.

In fact, this would be a most appropriate moment for you graduates to stand and give a heartfelt round of applause to thank the members of your family, as well as those on the Skidmore faculty and staff, who are here with you today.

But even as you focus on your transition to the next moment in your life, I ask that you also remain mindful of another value we emphasize at the College: *informed, responsible citizenship*. Or, if you are tired of hearing this phrase, feel free to replace it with the word: ‘community’ – denoting a human social context in which individuals acknowledge that they each have a fundamental interest in one another’s wellbeing. We speak about community quite a bit at Skidmore, and by doing so we affirm that the central objective of a liberal education – which is to prepare you to live a life of true autonomy as a reflective and self-aware individual – can be realized only within the context of a free and just society. Hence our expectation that a Skidmore education prepares you not just to make a place for yourself in the world but also to leave the world itself a better place. This expectation was expressed powerfully by the 19th Century American education reformer Horace Mann who enjoined all of us to be “ashamed to die” until we had “won some victory for humanity” – a charge I presented to you in the opening Convocation of your first year at Skidmore.

Most of you who are graduating today began your Skidmore careers in the summer of 2007 reading that year’s common text: *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, by Tracy Kidder. As you will recall, this book tells the story of Dr. Paul Farmer who set out, at a very early point in his life, to change the way medical services were provided to some of the neediest human beings on earth: the citizens of rural Haiti. Over time, the organization he went on to found, Partners in Health, has extended its work beyond Haiti to many other countries around the globe. It played an especially important role following Haiti’s catastrophic earthquake in January 2010.

Although few of us will effect change on the scale of Paul Farmer’s accomplishments, I do hope that his story will continue to inspire you to pursue your own personal cause that you either found or reaffirmed during your time at Skidmore – a way in which you will win your personal “victory for humanity.” If you are to do so, chances are you will need to put to good use the creativity you developed in a school that stresses that aspect of human accomplishment. But you also will need to call upon another crucial human trait that we tend to talk about less often: *courage* – the virtue mentioned in the quotation from Skidmore’s first President, Charles Henry Keyes that opened this ceremony today. Let me suggest why that virtue will be important.

Janet Whitman earlier reminded us that the United States and, indeed, most of the countries of the world now confront a roster of profoundly challenging issues too long and daunting to list here – and after all, this is supposed to be a day of celebration. But I will say that to address those issues will require all of us – and most especially our political leaders – to become more courageous. We need to find the *courage*, collectively, to name our problems and face them head-on, as opposed to pretending that they do not exist and hoping they will go away. And we need to find the *courage* to engage in actual, serious conversations regarding those issues – as opposed to separating into ideologically defined camps and shouting at one another from the safety of our individual perspectives.

Unfortunately, it is far too easy for leaders to enjoy short-term success by dividing communities and nations. By contrast, to be a leader who brings people together in genuine dialog requires far more skill and, again, much greater courage. As citizens of this democratic republic, all of us have a role in demanding – of both ourselves and our political leaders – the courage to replace acrimonious debate with fierce but genuine conversation. Doing so, I believe, is the only way for us to make smarter political decisions in the future than we have in the past.

But there is another, more personal, way in which you can help leave the world a better place than you found it, one that may well require the most courage of all and that takes us back to the commitment to the concept of community as we try to live it at Skidmore College. Over this past year, we have dealt with a number of issues that have brought home the unfortunate truth that we are not yet where we wish to be as a diverse and fully inclusive educational community. I assure you that, as we go forward, we will redouble our efforts to realize this ideal.

But what about you graduates? Though it is very important to us that you remain deeply connected to the College, you will no longer be part of the Skidmore campus community on a day-to-day basis. Even so, as you disperse across the much larger community of communities that constitutes this or any other nation you too will face issues of diversity and inclusion in your daily life. You will encounter difference in your work place, in your community life, and in your social relations. At those intersection points – when you meet with someone whose race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, political views, some other characteristic that can divide us one from another – you will confront your own, very personal, choice about how to react.

Such a choice can become even more acute when you witness something that someone else says or does that reflects bias or dismisses others based not on the quality of their character but rather on, for example, their choice of a life-partner or the color of their skin. These are moments in which we are forced to choose whether to leave the world a better or worse place, whether to win some small victory for humanity by speaking up and intervening – or, by remaining silent, to let the opportunity pass.

Mohandas Gandhi challenged his followers to “be the change” they hoped to see in the world, and he understood very well that doing so required considerable courage. Sometimes the most difficult challenge we face is to speak up and object to a statement or action by one of our closest associates or friends. It can be so easy simply to remain silent; and it can be so difficult to take an individual stand that might place at risk a personal relationship we consider important. But again, that is where we must find the courage to act, if we truly are to embody the change we all hope to see.

You graduates are the recipients of a great gift – you have been given the opportunity to spend four years interrogating the accumulated wisdom of humankind, the best of what our species has learned over seven millennia of recorded history. Through your own hard work, you have become a very different person from the one who entered the College at the beginning of this journey. As you go forward, please continue to broaden and deepen your liberal education; you are by no means finished with this process. But as you do, please also find in yourself the courage necessary to take

advantage of those everyday moments that occur in all of our lives to prove that you understand – and can put to use – just what these four years have been all about.